DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 473 CE 076 991

TITLE	"Overqualified" & Underemployed?
INSTITUTION	Institute of Personnel and Development, London (England).
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	22p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Age Discrimination; Career Choice; *Education Work Relationship; *Employer Attitudes; *Employment Qualifications; Foreign Countries; Labor Market; National Surveys; Older Adults; *Personnel Selection; *Recruitment; Trend Analysis; *Underemployment
IDENTIFIERS	*United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The problem of underemployment in the United Kingdom was examined in two studies. The first study sample, which was selected to be representative from the standpoints of firm size, 8 business types, and the United Kingdom's 14 economic regions, included 474 recruiters. They were interviewed by telephone regarding their recruitment problems. In the second study, qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 employers and various recruitment agencies, outplacement consultants, and graduate career advisors. One-fourth of the medium and large firms considered overqualified applicants a problem. Employers offering relatively low-level or unskilled jobs stated that they receive large numbers of applications from university graduates and even postgraduates. Recruiters often expressed reservations about hiring graduates for low-level positions out of fear that they would demand more money, faster promotion, and more interesting jobs than less qualified applicants would. Career consultants reported that some employers use overqualification as an excuse for rejecting mature applications, whereas other employers fear that experienced applicants will want more money, more responsibility, and quicker promotion. Career consultants also stated that people who have been downsized often apply for unsuitable jobs out of desperation and that employers sometimes attract unsuitable applicants through hyperbolic or vague advertising. (MN)

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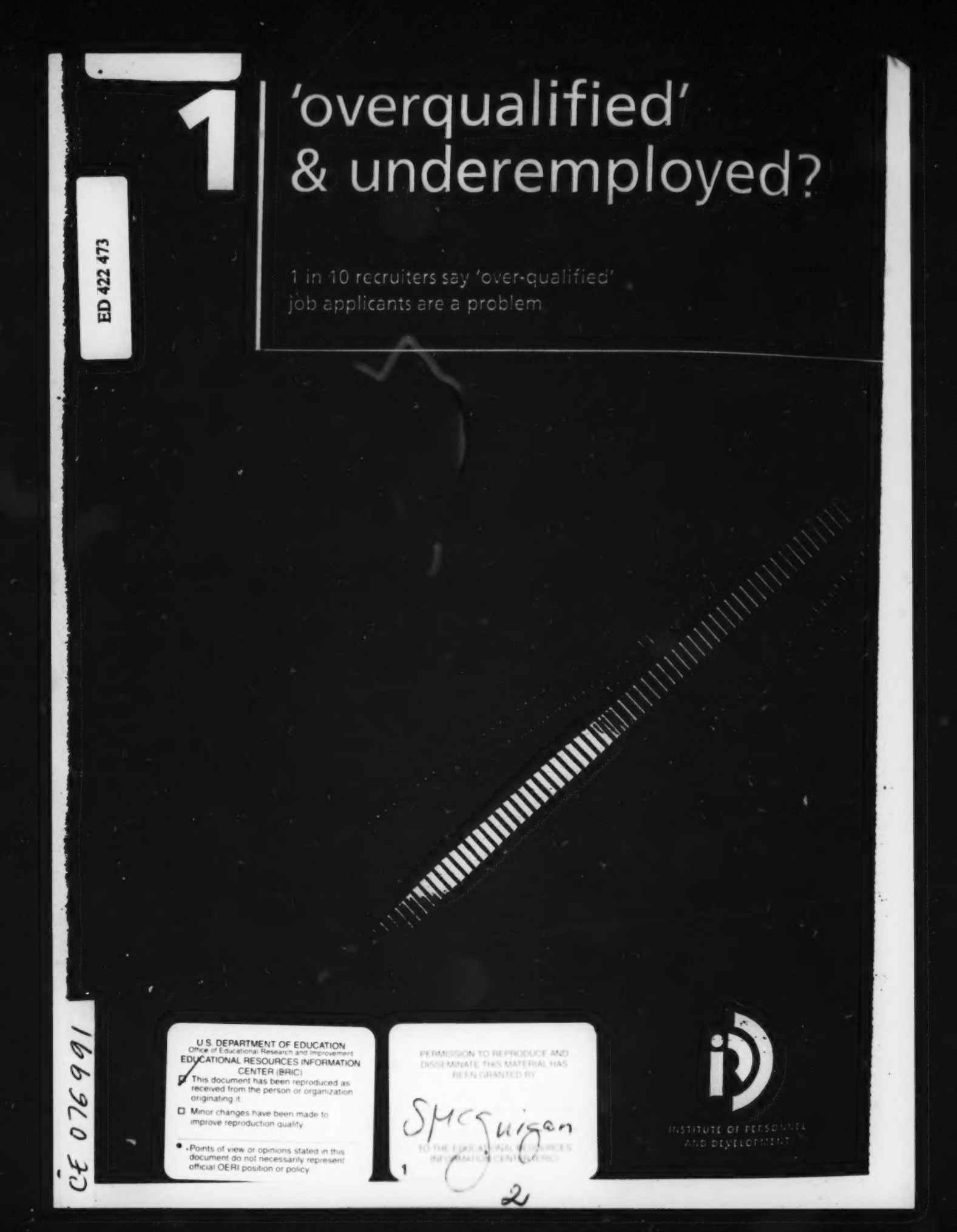
1 'overqualified' & underemployed?

1 in 10 recruiters say 'over-qualified' job applicants are a problem



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'overqualified' & underemployed?

This, the first in a new series of IPD survey reports, summarises the key findings of our research on whether 'over-qualified' job applicants pose a problem for UK recruiters.

About the research

The IPD carried out two research projects on over-qualified applicants during 1996 and 1997. The first of these, a telephone survey, asked UK employers about their recruitment problems. The second examined the phenomenon of over-qualified job applicants in more detail and is based on qualitative interviews with employers, recruitment agencies, outplacement consultants and graduate careers advisors.

Telephone survey of UK employers

Plus Four Market Research Limited conducted telephone interviews with 474 recruiters in UK organisations between 8-22 October 1996 on behalf of the IPD.

Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews with 30 employers and various recruitment agencies, outplacement consultants and graduate careers advisors were carried out by the IPD between March and June 1997.

Key findings

- Over-qualified job applicants are perceived as a problem by around a quarter of medium-sized and large firms.

- Employers offering relatively low-level or unskilled jobs say they receive a large number of applications from university graduates and even post-graduates. Recruiters often express reservations about taking on graduates for these positions because they fear they will demand more money, faster promotion and more interesting jobs than less-qualified applicants.

- Career consultants report that some employers tell mature job applicants they have been rejected because they are 'overqualified', when in fact they have been passed over because they are considered to be 'too old' for the position on offer. Others fear that experienced applicants will want more money, more responsibility and quicker promotion.

- People who have been made redundant often apply for jobs that they are unsuitable for out of desperation, say career consultants. Employers can also attract unsuitable applications through hyperbolic or vague recruitment advertising.

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telephone survey of UK employers

Extent of recruitment problems

Nearly half (47%) of the employers surveyed by the IPD said their organisation had experienced some recruitment and selection problems recently.
The principal problem, cited by nearly one third of respondents, was poor quality applicants (30%). Skills shortages were mentioned by a fifth of the sample (21%), while over-qualified applicants were perceived as a problem by one in ten respondents (11%).

Type of employer affected

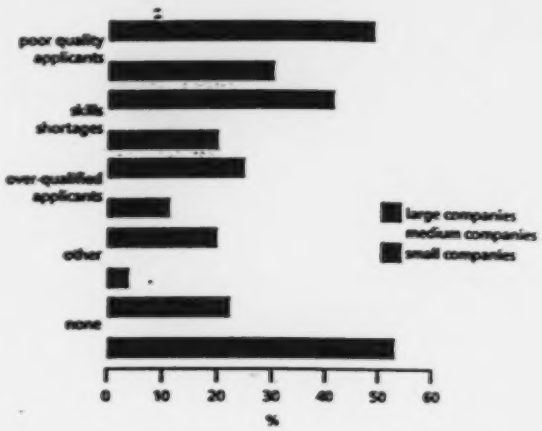
While the majority of UK organisations surveyed did not appear to have any trouble recruiting staff (53%), the picture was very different for medium-sized and large businesses. These were roughly twice as likely to have experienced difficulties as smaller companies (78% v 46%).

Around one in four medium and large companies complained of over-qualified applicants (29% and 25%), compared to one in ten small companies (11%). Service companies were more likely to regard over-qualified applicants as a problem than other industry sectors (25% v 0-11%).

Poor quality applicants were a problem for around half of medium and large companies (50% and 49%), compared to nearly a third of small companies (30%). Skills shortages were reported by nearly half of medium and large companies (44% and 42%), but were less of an issue for small companies (20%).

Employers in the South of England and Scotland were more likely than those in the North and the Midlands to have encountered over-qualified applicants (16% and 15% v 6-9%) and skills shortages (25% and 21% v 14-19%).

Recruitment problems



Methodology

149 respondents were interviewed in small companies (1-99 employees), 150 in medium-sized companies (100-499 employees) and 175 in large companies (500+ employees). Within each sub-base, interviews were conducted with a representative cross-sample of companies in 14 economic regions and 8 business activities, according to the Dun and Bradstreet database. In analysis, interviews with the different sized companies were weighted to represent their true occurrence in the UK. Thus companies employing 1-99 employees represent 97.6% of the total weighted base, rather than 31.4% unweighted. The survey results are based on weighted data.

Definition of North, South and Midlands

North: North, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, Greater Manchester, Scotland

South: South East (inside and outside of M25), South West, Channel Islands

Midlands: East Midlands, West Midlands, East Anglia, Wales

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qualitative interviews

Who is 'overqualified'?

It is generally accepted that a well-qualified or experienced person is better equipped to find employment than an unqualified, inexperienced person. However, redundant people with extensive experience and graduates may find it difficult to get jobs that do not require their expertise. All the recruiters interviewed by the IPD said that they will give these applicants a fair hearing, but many also expressed reservations. They argued that 'over-qualified' people become frustrated and restive in posts that do not provide them with sufficient intellectual stimulation, money or promotion prospects and tend to leave after only a short time.

Having established that one in ten recruiters feel over-qualified applicants pose a recruitment problem, the IPD decided to investigate this phenomenon further by seeking the views of employers, recruitment agencies, outplacement consultants and graduate careers advisors.

We started by asking recruiters what they mean when they talk about 'over-qualified' job applicants. Broadly speaking, 'overqualified' is used to describe two groups: graduates, who are considered to be 'overeducated' for the job on offer and mature applicants, who are thought to be 'overexperienced'.

The graduate's lot

"We get people with degrees and God knows what applying for bog standard jobs"
– District Council, North Yorkshire

"You get people with strings of qualifications applying for jobs that don't need a lot of qualifications and you think - what are they doing?"
– Food manufacturer, Hertfordshire

Employers offering relatively low-level or unskilled jobs indicate that they receive a large number of applications from university graduates and even post-graduates. According to a graduate careers advisor for a new university in the north of England, this is attributable to three factors: "Graduates going for what is traditionally seen as non-graduate employment is first, linked to the economy; second, linked to the expansion of higher education and the increase in the number of graduates; and third, linked to the quality of graduates being produced."

Throughout the nineties, the explosion of student numbers has led to a redefinition of both 'graduate' and 'graduate job'. More students than ever are rolling off the university production line. In 1980, one in eight school leavers went on to take a diploma or degree.[1] Now nearly one in three go on to study at university.[2] 'Graduate' jobs, however, have failed to keep pace with this rapid increase in student numbers.

A young person with a degree is now becoming the norm, rather than the exception. They routinely seek what would previously have been seen as 'non-graduate' employment. "I came into this racket when a high proportion of job-seeking graduates joined blue-chip companies," says Hugh Jones, careers advisor at the University of Wales at Swansea. "Today the jobs in the blue chip companies have stayed the same but the graduate population has increased out of recognition. Furthermore, the distinction between graduate and non-graduate jobs has blurred. I remember when teaching and nursing were non-graduate jobs, but they are graduate jobs now. The fire service is looking for graduates, but is fire officer a graduate job?"

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"A 'graduate' job now is any job a graduate can get," says Rennie May, director of careers services at Durham University. "Before, graduates got jobs with a pinstripe suit, a bowler hat and a company car. Now there are so many graduates, they tend to look for work that would previously have been done by people with A levels: secretarial work, museum attendees, very junior managerial work – shop work even. Employers who remember the way things were a few years ago may say, 'you're a bit overqualified for this', but they are failing to recognise the situation as it is now."

Graduates with good degrees from older, more prestigious universities probably have the best chance of securing a graduate post. Faced with a glut of applications, employers tend to resort to A level scores, degree classifications and institutional reputations to assess the quality of prospective graduate employees.[3] It is likely therefore that students from less prestigious universities, with lower class degrees, will encounter a period of low-prestige, low-pay jobs – or even unemployment – when they first enter the labour market.

A 1995 survey by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research showed, for example, that almost half of the graduates employed in building societies and banks work in low-prospect clerical positions. One employer quoted in that report said that such low-level jobs were "very suitable for a 2.2 from a new university who's only ever worked part-time in Sainsbury's."[4]

Some employers, especially those that run small and medium-sized companies, have underestimated the extent of the expansion of higher education. Graduates are still viewed as a homogeneous group of 'high-fliers' rather than an increasingly diverse set of individuals with different career expectations, skills, competencies, work experience and family commitments.

"Sometimes employers have no understanding of what's happening in education, and what degrees are all about" says Hugh Jones, adding that many are surprised when they advertise for a school leaver and find that half the applicants are graduates. "These days if you are advertising for a two A level post, most people with two A levels are at university. By the end of the millennium there will be two million in higher education, and a high proportion of 18 year olds will go off to do a degree. If you want bright, young people they are now at university."

Why do graduates apply for 'non-graduate' jobs?

...financial necessity

Money is the main reason why graduates apply for non-graduate jobs. The current student loan arrangements mean that many graduates leave university in debt. In the first instance, they are prepared to take any job that will get them out of the red. "Many students are anxious to get any sort of job because of financial pressures," says Hugh Jones of the University of Wales. "More and more students are leaving with substantial debts – £2,000 to £3,000. They've got to pay them off so they can't afford to hang around, waiting for the ideal job to come along."

Given their precarious financial situation, graduates are terrified of unemployment. For many, any kind of work is better than nothing. A job provides money and the prospect of moving on to something better. "There are many more graduates than graduate-type jobs, so people have to start at a different level," says Shahida Osman, careers advisor at the University of North London. "They opt for a compromise solution – what the employers may call 'aiming too low'. But a student sees it as getting a toe in the door. It's better to be employed and building up skills and contacts than sitting at home."

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Students go to considerable lengths to get a job. "We quite often get graduates applying who say that they are willing to re-locate, say from East Anglia to the North, for a job that doesn't actually pay that much – £10-12K," says a recruiter for a Yorkshire-based retailer. "I've had graduates with history and physics degrees in here virtually begging me for a job that could be done by a monkey and pays absolute peanuts," reports another recruiter. Those graduates that can't secure full-time jobs, however lowly, usually end up semi-employed or self-employed in part-time or contract employment – in burger bars, pubs, the leisure industry, the retail trade – or working as home helps.

...it's a jungle out there

Students may also tend to apply for non-graduate posts because they think that graduate jobs are unattainable – despite the fact that employers are expecting a 12 per cent rise in 'graduate' vacancies this year.[5] According to careers advisors interviewed by the IPD, the growth in graduate jobs has not significantly altered students' pessimistic outlook.

"Students today are still stuck in recession thinking," says Hugh Jones of the University of Wales. "The job market has improved substantially, but it takes a year or two for the message to percolate through." According to Barbara Graham, director of careers services at the University of Strathclyde, "There's a time-lag between the reality and the perception of the reality. My own students perceive the job market to be a lot worse than it actually is. Some employers are extending their closing dates for applications. I'm surrounded by messages to phone people who are saying, 'How can we get IT grads – we've still got vacancies'. Our fortnightly vacancy bulletin usually carries about 90 vacancies."

The perception that jobs are scarce has contributed to the growth of the post-graduate population. Around a fifth of final year students surveyed recently by High Fliers Research intended to do a post-graduate course.[6] Those who take up post-graduate study often believe that they will only secure a reasonable position if they are armed with extra qualifications. "A lot of graduates nowadays are now saying 'I need a post-graduate qualification to give me an advantage in the jobs market,'" says a careers advisor in a new university in the north. "They see it as an insurance policy, although when they eventually get out there, we are not sure they have done themselves any favours by staying on."

There are other motives too for seeking post-graduate qualifications. Careers advisors have noticed that students are using these courses to repackage or 're-badge' their education. "If someone graduates from a university that they think is not sufficiently prestigious," says Barbara Graham, "they will move to a post-graduate course somewhere else, so that they can market themselves as a graduate of, say, the University of Strathclyde, as opposed to a graduate of the University of Gobbledegook."

This trend has not gone unnoticed by employers. "There was a time when we would recruit a lot of A level youngsters, or kids who were doing City and Guilds courses," says one director of a London-based print firm. "Then they all started going off to universities – they were called polytechnics before – same buildings, different names – for a BA after their names. Now it's not unknown for us to get applications from people who have got the BA and a fancy string of new letters attached to them." A recruiter for a chartered accountants in London says, "When we recruit at the lowest level – administration and technical staff – we often get ten applications a day from people who have got numerous degrees and who haven't worked for years."

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...family commitments

There are other factors which may influence a graduate's job search. The typical graduate no longer conforms to the old stereotype: 21, middle class, solvent, and mobile. There is now a much more diverse student population, with more women and mature students participating in higher education.

Many graduates now still live at home because they can't afford to live elsewhere. Many more, especially those who were mature students, are rooted to a single locale by children, other family commitments and mortgages. If they are only able to accept work in a restricted area, they are likely to apply for a wider range of jobs. Hugh Jones at the University of Wales is acutely aware of this problem: "Swansea is a beautiful city. We have the sea, but there's no jobs on it. We have lovely countryside, but there are no jobs there either. Some students, particularly mature students, are geographically limited here – so if it moves, you're going to apply for it."

Cathy, 26, studied in Wales and like those described above, was initially unable to seek work outside the area because she had to care for an infirm parent. "Wales is just a big hole as far as jobs were concerned. There's not much going other than really badly paid jobs. Most students who had to stay on were happy to get a job at a burger joint because it was better than nothing. Most of the local employers didn't want to employ graduates anyway: if they saw the BA they'd count you out. They thought students had ideas above their station and that they would leave for London as soon as something better came along. They preferred people who were weighted down with kids and mortgages because they'd be less likely to move on."

Employers' reservations about 'over-qualified' graduates

...they have higher expectations than non-graduates

Employers, especially small and medium-sized firms, continue to express reservations about taking on graduate staff. They worry that graduates will demand more money, faster promotion, and more interesting jobs than their less-qualified counterparts. "They feel that they have to give more back to a graduate than a non-graduate," says Julie Murray of agency Adecco Alfred Marks. "Graduates expect to move fast up the promotion ladder." A recruiter for a computer company in Buckinghamshire says that while recruiting graduates will work "in 80 per cent of cases," the remaining 20 per cent didn't work out: "We lost them quickly because they took the first job that was offered, and then found out that it wasn't what they were looking for, and that it wasn't paying enough money."

Careers advisors argue that employers often have an outdated perception of students, imagining that they are all high-fliers with high-flying expectations to match. They point out that higher education today caters for students with a far wider range of abilities than previously. "Some employers expect all graduates to be Shell or Ford types," says Hugh Jones of the University of Wales. "But just because you've been to university, it doesn't necessarily mean that you are a high-flier. The top students I'm seeing are picking up job offers with the merchant banks. But some students are not right for high profile jobs – they may never be. I see nice, ordinary kids who've got nice ordinary degrees who will possibly go into nice, ordinary jobs, and develop."

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Some employers are better than others at integrating and making the most of the graduates they employ. "Most big companies with multinational structures know how to develop a graduate," says a careers advisor for a new university in the north of England. "Yet nowadays graduates tend to look to the SMEs – small and medium employers – for jobs. Unlike the big companies, the SMEs tend to be more ignorant about the kind of skills a graduate can bring to them and how those skills can be used. It is sometimes difficult to get the SMEs to even think about taking them on – they say: 'We've always taken on people with A levels, what do we do with a graduate?' – so we encourage work placement to give them a taste of what it's like to have them on the staff."

...they will move on

Employers also express fears that graduates will move on within a few years (or less) of taking a job. "You know that the people from colleges won't stay – when they find something more suitable they'll move on," says a recruiter for a Yorkshire-based manufacturer. "There doesn't seem much point in offering someone with a degree work in a factory, does there really?" says a recruiter for a manufacturing company in Norfolk. "They are not going to be there long-term. It's better to get someone who's going to be there longer, because in a production job, it's worth training them and people will learn from experience. Ideally we want people with four or five years' experience who know their jobs inside out. We are looking for a settled workforce who are going to do the job."

Many employers also suspect that students take a low-status job as a spring-board to something better. "We are getting a number of graduates applying who are academically overprepared for the kind of work we are offering" says a recruiter at a typesetting company in Bristol. "You tend to get suspicious of them and think, 'For them it's only a stop-gap, a stepping stone to something else.'" But current employment, and access to a reference, is crucial for a student trying to break into the job market. "They'll think, 'Oh, God, what am I going to do? – right, an office job!'" says a recruiter for a London-based firm of chartered accountants: "They do it to get experience – any experience, so they've got a job and they can get a reference. Then they can move up from there."

While it is certainly true that a significant proportion of graduates do hop from job to job, a recent survey suggests the majority (62%) stay with their employer for at least five years.' The survey by Park HR (formerly PA Advertising) and Saville & Holdsworth Ltd found that one third of graduates move on to another job in the first three years after joining a company. However, those who remain for two years will typically stay for the longer term.

...they lack experience

Lack of experience counts against all young people, including graduates. "There's a lot of people out there who are getting qualifications, but if they haven't got any work experience to go with it, it's a problem for them. They have to get their foot in the door," says a recruiter for a utility in the West Midlands. According to one director, "Young people are better educated, but they all lack experience, wherever they start from. Really, the letters don't make much difference one way or another, because they're all starting at square one."

According to some employers, the extra graduate qualifications do not necessarily bring more to the job. "A university-educated person will learn the ropes in a few months – but so do the A level ones, to be honest," says the director of a London-based print firm. "Don't misunderstand me – I think it's marvellous that kids have the opportunity to go to university now. But in terms of doing the job, there's not the gap you'd expect. A job's a job. We wouldn't mind having

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Albert Einstein, as long as he was a clean worker, but we don't need an Albert Einstein. We've got a lad here who studied sociology at Greenwich College. He's a good sort, but there's not much sociology can be applied here. We need reliability and know-how."

Some universities now run project-based and work experience schemes to encourage employers to take on graduates longer term. "The small and medium employers (SMEs) tend to recruit people with one or two years' experience and/or people who've grown up with the firm," says Hugh Jones of the University of Wales. "At Swansea we have a range of projects where graduates work with SMEs for three to six months. They are often pleasantly surprised at how quickly the graduate picks up the job: 'Gosh, he's picked it up in three weeks – we thought it would take a year to learn'. Many graduates can bridge the knowledge and experience gap very quickly."

Graduates with relevant work experience are more attractive to SMEs, who need their new recruits to be effective performers immediately. Shell UK's solution has been to fund a programme that provides students in their penultimate year with eight-week structured placements in SMEs and the voluntary sector. The Shell Technology Enterprise Programme (Step) is grant-aided by two government departments and expects to place 1,500 students this year. The projects are hugely popular, recording satisfaction rates of greater than 90 per cent among students and employers.[8]

...they will get bored

Employers often argue that low-skill, low-prestige jobs would bore a graduate. "Obviously graduates are resilient and committed, and have all those other good qualities," says a recruiter for a firm of chartered accountants. "But I tend not to be interested because I think they will get bored with the job. You can't employ somebody with a first class degree to file all day. It's not fair on them." Recruiters are also concerned if there is a mismatch between the graduate's area of study and the industry they have joined. "If you've got a degree in sociology or geography and you go into an industry where it will be no use to what you are doing, recruiters will think that you are not going to enjoy the job because you did your degree in something else," says Julie Murray of Adecco Alfred Marks.

Yet careers advisors argue that graduates have the drive and intellect to turn a dull job into something better. "Some small companies are frightened to take on a graduate. The recruiter may think, 'They won't be interested in mundane work,'" says Shahida Osman of the University of North London. "What they don't understand is that often, when graduates go into a job that's usually done by an A level person, they always seem to add more. They can develop the work and turn a mundane job into a challenging one."

Careers advisors criticise those employers for not exploiting the full potential of the graduates they recruit. "There is a lot of underutilisation of graduates," says Strathclyde University's Barbara Graham. "Former graduates never complain, 'I'm worked to death in this job'. They say, 'I could do the work with one hand tied behind my back'. One said, 'I'm ashamed to say I don't go in after Wednesday – I can only spin the work out for three days of the week'. Students need to be stretched. If employers hire them, then lose them, it may be because they don't let them grow."

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'Overqualification' – a euphemism for something else

Careers advisors sometimes suspect that some employers who turn down graduates on the basis that they are 'overqualified', are really rejecting them for some other reason. "Overqualification is sometimes used as a polite way to say, 'You are too immature,' or, 'You are a young man applying for women's work,' or even, 'You are overqualified but underexperienced,'" says one careers advisor for a new university. "When people say that they are getting overqualified people – be careful what they mean by it," warns Brian Ayling of Right Associates. "The classic line, 'No, terribly sorry, you are overqualified' may mean, 'I perceive you as a threat to my organisation or to me'. It takes a big man to say, she's got a double first at Cambridge – she could do us a lot of good."

Too many brains for not enough jobs?

Employers' concerns about employing graduates in jobs which do not require a degree beg the larger question of whether the UK is producing more graduates than employers need.

Research conducted by Professor Peter Dolton and Anna Vignoles of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne shows that 38 per cent of people surveyed who graduated in 1980 did not get a 'graduate' job when they left university.[9] Six years into their careers, nearly a third still had not secured a job that they considered to be of graduate level, suggesting that those who initially missed out on a 'graduate' position were destined to remain 'overeducated'.[10] Arts and social science graduates were more likely to end up in non-graduate positions than individuals with engineering, technical or science degrees, while graduates with first class or upper second class degrees were more likely to make the transition from a 'non-graduate' job to a 'graduate' job.[11]

Despite these and other findings indicating that significant numbers of UK graduates may be 'overeducated' – in so far as they are in jobs requiring sub-degree level qualifications or no qualifications at all – it is premature to claim we have too many graduates, say Dolton and Vignoles. This is partly due to the difficulty of defining what is or isn't a 'graduate' job and lack of evidence about whether graduates add value to 'non-graduate' jobs. Much of the research on 'overeducation' is fairly old and relies on subjective self-surveys, where graduates are simply asked whether or not they needed a degree to do or get their job. Using external analysts to determine the average educational requirements of a particular job title is also problematic, since not all workers with the same job title are doing work of equal difficulty.

Assessing whether graduates are 'overeducated' is also complicated by evidence of 'qualification inflation'. This is where employers respond to the increased supply of graduates by upgrading the educational requirements of jobs, without changing the content, resulting in underestimates of the true incidence of overeducation. For example, Dolton and Vignoles point out that Executive Officers in the Civil Service used to need only A levels, whereas today they usually require a degree, even though in many instances the actual job has changed very little.[12]

It is also possible that graduates transform 'non-graduate' jobs into graduate-level positions over time, because of the extra skills and knowledge they bring to the job. "If graduate secretaries or graduate sales staff are better at their jobs because of their higher education, ... overeducation may be less of a problem than first thought",[13] Dolton and Vignoles argue, particularly if the cultural benefits of having a more educated population are taken into account, such as lower rates of crime and divorce and better parenting.

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Employment trends suggest that firms will become increasingly reliant on graduate recruits. The Skills Audit published by the DfEE and Cabinet Office in June 1996 forecast that by the year 2001, professional, managerial and technical jobs will account for 39 per cent of total employment, compared to 27 per cent in 1981. Graduates will probably take the lion's share of these. By contrast, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual jobs, which represented nearly 42 per cent of total employment in 1981, are expected to make up only 28 per cent of all jobs in 2001.

Small and medium-sized firms may also have to look to graduates to fill technical and supervisory posts if deficiencies in higher intermediate skills training are not remedied. Between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of the workforce employed in firms of less than 50 people is expected to rise from 44 per cent to 49 per cent. Core skills such as communication and numeracy, problem-solving, the ability to handle IT, work in teams and rapidly learn new skills will become ever more important for graduates seeking employment in SMEs, whose employees typically have to carry out a wider range of functions than those in larger firms.

Employers who are reluctant to employ graduates in what they perceive are 'non-graduate' positions may be missing out on a valuable source of talent. A recent report from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) suggests that the increasing use of graduate supervisors in plants in the automotive parts, electronics and domestic appliance industries may be helping to improve UK industrial competitiveness.[14]

Rather than using graduate engineers to supplant supervisors recruited in the traditional way from the ranks of shopfloor workers, the stated aim of these firms was to try and achieve a balanced mix of supervisors with academic and shopfloor backgrounds. With better educational qualifications than traditional factory supervisors, graduates may be better able "to see the wider picture and keep up to date with technical developments elsewhere"[15] the report says. Author and NIESR research fellow, Geoff Mason, believes they can play a big role in transferring into factories new manufacturing ideas such as 'just in time' production and team-working techniques and may also act as a two-way conduit for ideas between senior managers and production staff.

If more employers are to benefit from increased participation in higher education, some will need to rethink their assumptions about the kinds of jobs that are suitable for graduates. Not every graduate can walk straight into a profession like law or a trainee management position. Increasingly they are taking up low-level positions just to get 'a foot in the door'. Firms who are prepared to upgrade jobs and modify production processes as the job holder develops stand a better chance of retaining graduate recruits and profiting from their knowledge and skills.

However, as Geoff Mason notes, employers' willingness to upgrade jobs or create new ones "will partly depend on the perceived quality of new graduates applying for employment."[16] He argues that concerns about the deficiencies of many graduates in respect of numeracy, communications skills, initiative taking and commercial awareness suggest there is an urgent need for serious reform of A levels to ensure the development of more 'rounded' graduates.[17]

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Some employers have also expressed concern that the existing degree classification system fails to provide a clear indication of the individual's knowledge of core business skills and the outcome of their work experience. The IPD, in its submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, suggested that all higher education courses be required to specify learning outcomes (as is the case with GNVQs and NVQs), so that degree certificates record what the graduate knows, understands and can do. This will not only be of value to SMEs and other employers by giving them a better idea of what knowledge and skills the applicant is likely to have, but will also help university applicants (including post-graduates) select their courses.

Lack of relevant work experience is one reason why SMEs reject graduate applicants. In its submission to the Dearing Committee, the IPD also pointed out the need to develop better university-employer partnerships to provide much greater integration of academic learning and practical experience, particularly through apprenticeship and scholarship schemes.

Employers also need to be more directly involved in careers guidance aimed at 16-19 year olds and at older people thinking about entering higher education. Providing prospective students with relevant labour market information will enable them to make more informed decisions about which course and institution to attend. The provision of careers advice to graduates also needs to be improved so that new recruits do not end up underutilised because they are unsure what the job entails prior to actually doing it.

The attrition rate of new recruits may also be reduced by improving their induction and training programmes, which many graduates regard as inadequate. Eighty-eight per cent of around 30,000 graduates recently surveyed by T-Three Consultants cited good training and career prospects as the main reasons for choosing their employer, yet only 39 per cent said they were happy with their training and still fewer (25 per cent) were happy with their career prospects.[9]

To conclude: if the UK is to fully utilise and derive competitive advantage from its graduate workforce, our education system will have to place more emphasis on preparing students for the world of work. The provision of structured work experience placements and improved careers advice by university-employer partnerships will help overcome employers' misgivings about the value of recruiting graduates and open students' eyes to the possibilities of 'non-traditional' graduate careers. However, employers recruiting graduates for non-graduate level jobs may also have to adjust their working practices so that individuals can 'grow' the job, or else risk losing them to other companies offering superior training, development and promotion opportunities.

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The mature applicant's lot

Some employers indicate that they are now approached by large numbers of applicants who are 'overexperienced'. Most commonly, they are people who expect to be, or have been, made redundant from a more senior job. This phenomenon is largely driven by structural changes in the economy, which have dislodged and reorganised whole layers and sectors within industry and commerce. When large numbers have been removed from the same level in the same area of enterprise, it may be difficult for the applicant to secure a job requiring the same kind of skills in the short term. "If a layer has been removed from their organisation, the applicant is also aware that it's happening in many other organisations," says Linda Aspey of Aspey Associates. Consequently, they may decide they have to take a job at a more junior level because there are no top jobs going.

However, as the IPD's interviews suggest, the phenomenon of 'over-experienced' people applying for less demanding jobs may be more complex than it first appears. Older candidates may lower their sights because they believe that they will be discriminated against on the basis of their age. "They'll apply for a job below their capabilities because they think, 'I've got to be realistic – who'll want me at 54?'" says Linda Aspey. And for their part, recruiters may tell candidates that they have been rejected because they are 'over-qualified', when in fact they have been rejected because they pose a threat, or they are 'wrong' for other reasons. This begs the question – do employers attract 'over-experienced' candidates through imprecise advertising?

Why do people apply for jobs requiring less experience than they have?

...financial factors

A person who has just been made redundant often carries substantial financial commitments – from school fees to mortgages to car repayments. They need a new job to pay the bills, and fast. Their first response, say the outplacement consultants, is panic. They apply for just about every credible job in sight – some jobs on the same level and, typically, many more beneath it. "They think, 'God, that was a surprise, I've been thrown out. In order to get back in, I've got to drop my sights,'" says Brian Ayling of Right Associates. "They'll apply for everything with the right sort of title and location. It's the instinctive first aim: to hit everything – hence the 700 advertisement replies."

"People start off by clutching at straws," says Julie Hopkins of Methven Career Development. Every outplacement consultant has stories of people who apply for totally inappropriate jobs. "I knew a guy – a very experienced manager – who did a job search before he came to see me," recalls Aspey Associates' Linda Aspey. "He'd applied for a job as a librarian because he saw the words: 'manage a team of 20'. He has no qualifications as a librarian, and was overqualified as a manager, but he thought, 'I can manage 20, and I enjoy being in libraries.'" "They do it out of desperation – they want a job to pay the bills," says Marie-Rose Hyde-Blake of Connaught Executive Career Services.

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"We get applications for normal retail stores manager jobs from people who've been regional managers, or even area managers," says a recruiter at a Yorkshire-based retailer. "When we advertised for a laboratory assistant, we were looking for a younger person, but we got people of 38, 40, 45 with chemistry and physics degrees," says a Leicester-based manufacturer. "The over-qualification issue cuts in for us when you are looking for a human resources manager or a financial controller, and you get HR directors or finance directors. You advertise for production directors and you get managing directors," says Neil Sampson of the agency Austin Knight.

James, 50, was made redundant from a middle management job in the financial sector. He now works for a parts firm. "My reaction to losing my job was pure panic really. I sent my CV to more or less every company who advertised, no matter whether I fitted the bill or not. Somehow, I'd deluded myself that someone would read it through and say, 'He sounds like a competent fellow'. I'm sure they all went in the bin. Later, I realised that people weren't going to hire me for what I could do, but for what they needed. I realised that my experience was putting people off – they thought I'd be after their jobs. So instead of talking myself up, I started talking myself down. I left out some of the promotions on my CV and I shaved a few years off my age. I wouldn't call it lying – just bending the truth to help myself."

...the 'age' factor

Although people can be made redundant at any age, the older the employee, the greater the risk that they will be 'let go' or 'retired'. Only two thirds of men between 55 and 64 are still at work, compared to the 91 per cent who worked in 1970.[9] Companies have nudged or forced thousands of older staff into retirement. Logically, older people with longer working lives are the most experienced sector of the workforce. But as management guru Charles Handy has indicated, the over-50s are, "Too fat, too old, too rich, too expensive"[10] – or at least, that's the way many employers see it.

Many older people perceive it differently. Although some happily accept early retirement, others want to continue working. "Most people don't have the slightest intention of retiring – they don't want to retire," says Marie-Rose Hyde-Blake of Connaught Executive Careers Services. A 1997 report by the Institute for Employment Studies showed that while 40 per cent did not want another job,[11] the rest – for reasons such as pensions, family security and self-image – found job loss a great problem. Many are prepared to adapt to new jobs, with less money and responsibility if necessary. "For one job, we received a lot of applications from people who'd been forced into retirement, and who clearly felt that they still had ten to fifteen years left in them," says one personnel manager. "You could tell from their letters that they felt they had been put out on the scrap-heap, and they were very resentful about it. They kept saying, 'We've worked to line someone else's pocket – now we want to put something back into society.'"

In some cases older people may aim low because they think that they will be discriminated against because of their age. "A lot of older people don't want to retire, but they are very aware of ageism," says Julie Hopkins of Methven Career Development. "They think, 'Maybe I'll set my sights lower because perhaps I won't get the same kind of job.' I know it's been hyped up by the media, but the age barrier does exist. Recruiters are reluctant to take people over 50 – even though many people plan to work until they are 60. There could be another ten years there, time someone aged 30 would not be prepared to offer."

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However, in some cases an older person who has been made redundant is content to consider jobs that will give them a gradual wind-down to retirement. "These people think: 'I've had a first career and now I'm after something less,'" says Brian Ayling of Right Associates. "They are almost mentally retiring. After a redundancy, they may think 'Hey, I don't need any more of this. I've just got a jolly good package, my pension starts in a year or two, so I'll go for something down the scale on stress and commitment, which I'll also enjoy.'"

According to Effective Resources's Peter Lewis, "When people have been working all hours, then find themselves redundant, they think, 'What's it all about?' It makes people reappraise their priorities, and sometimes they are happy to do another job for which they may appear to be overqualified. This is not because they want an easy time, but because they want to redress the balance between home and work and to do a job in which they perform well."

...the stigma of unemployment

Although there is less stigma attached to redundancy than in the past, a spell of unemployment looks bad on the CV, and the chances of being re-employed lessen as the period of unemployment lengthens. (According to an Institute for Employment Studies report, 56 per cent of employers believe that people's skills deteriorate the longer they are out of work, and 54 per cent think that work attitudes and discipline diminish.[21])

About half of those made redundant find a job within six months, and sometimes at the same salary. But some highly-qualified people find that their expertise hinders them if they go for less demanding jobs. Consequently, there has been a trend towards self-employment and contract consultancy work in some sectors, especially where highly-rated jobs are not readily available. A survey by career management consultants, Drake Beam Moran, indicated, for example, that of 700 redundant executives, 40 per cent considered self-employment as an option.[22]

Mark, 41, who was made redundant, is now self-employed: "In my trade you have to secure a new position within three months or you're dead meat. I went to two interviews, both for very safe jobs, and I regretted it. I was too well-qualified for the positions on offer, and by applying for jobs lower down my experience worked against me because they thought I'd thrown in the towel. As time passed, consultancy became more attractive. It meant I could showcase my skills to best effect. Now I'm earning slightly more, although I work harder and the risks are slightly greater."

Employers' reservations about 'over-experienced' applicants

Employers' reservations about recruiting a person who has more experience than the job demands is broadly similar to the reservations they express about graduates – except the focus is on too much experience rather than too many academic qualifications. Some recruiters fear that the 'over-experienced' candidate will place too many demands on the organisation. "Most clients still see things in a box: they work out what kind of skills are necessary and from that they deduce what kind of experience someone is likely to have had," says Neil Sampson, principal consultant at search and selection agency, Austin Knight. "Then, if someone suddenly comes along who can offer twice the amount, the client feels that they can't deliver a satisfying enough post to them."

Sampson argues that the attitude to an 'over-experienced' candidate is more shaped by the recruiter's view about 'trading down' than it is about the candidate's outlook. "People use their own personal experience to judge others by – they think, 'Why would

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they want to go back? I wouldn't want to do it, so why would they?'" But, he says, the flattening of corporate structures may open up more opportunities for those with lots of experience. "The good thing about the reorganisations that we've had in industry and commerce is that it has encouraged flatter structures. The flatter they are, the more scope there is for people with lots of different experiences to make a contribution. People who are very narrowly focused haven't got the other qualities and experiences to offer."

...they will expect promotion

Some recruiters worry that 'over-experienced' people will expect automatic promotion from a low-level job. Many applicants certainly work on that premise says Maureen Ingle of Ashley Career Counselling: "They think, 'If I get this job, I'll very quickly be promoted when they see how good I am – so I'll get my feet in through the door because possession is nine tenths of the law.'"

But sometimes employers feel that they are not able to offer or guarantee a steady career ascent. "An over-qualified candidate is looking for a step up the ladder," says a recruiter from a telecommunications consultancy in Northamptonshire. "If the company grows – which it could well do – we'd obviously look at these people favourably for stepping up and taking on more roles. But because we don't know if the company will grow, we can't give them that assurance at the recruiting stage."

...they will get bored

Many employers express concern that 'over-experienced' people may not commit themselves to a job which they see as being beneath their abilities. "If people are overqualified, they are going to get bored. If you've been a manager, you are not going to sit happily in a clerk's chair forever," says one recruiter. "Some mature people who apply are qualified to senior manager level, and OK, they've got the experience, but they'd probably get bored and wouldn't stay," says a recruiter at a Peterborough-based manufacturer.

"If somebody has been working at a strategic level, at a director's level, let's say, and then they apply for a tactical job, I think some clients will say, 'That person is too big for the job,'" argues Neil Sampson of agency Austin Knight. "They may think that the candidate would not focus on their new job because it is something they did two movements ago. Personally, I would challenge the client who said: 'They're too big for the job' to give the candidate more targeted feedback." According to Peter Lewis of career consultants, Effective Resources, employers are too suspicious. "There's a genuine concern that somebody who's had a bigger job may not be as motivated or challenged by something less demanding. I think that misreads the situation – people may be just as motivated, and bring to it a safe pair of hands."

...they will move on

Recruiters express concern that 'over-experienced' people will up sticks and move on if the job does not provide sufficient stimulation, money or prospects. According to one recruiter, "They'll take what they can get to pay the bills, and start looking around for something better." According to Brian Ayling of career consultants Right Associates, "An employer may suspect that somebody is only going for a job to fill time. They'll look at him and think, 'Good Lord, if we take this bloke on, he's going to go for something better. He'll only be here for a few months while he's looking for a real job.'"

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A recruiter for a Northamptonshire-based consultancy also has her doubts. "Applicants who have been in more senior positions and have been made redundant will apply for anything and everything. I've actually asked them, 'Surely having done this, this and this you'll find the position a bit boring and mundane?' The response you tend to get is, 'I've been there, done it, and I'm quite happy with this post'. My instinct is: they'll be happy in the interim, because it's easier to get another job when you have a job. Recruiters are more receptive to people who are in work than those who are out of work."

Recruiters also worry that a person who takes up a post that requires a lot of training will seek different work as soon as they have reached the point when they are most useful to the enterprise. "Obviously the managers are concerned that a person might only be with them for a relatively short period of time," says a recruiter at a borough council in the north east. "Sometimes it's not a problem if it's a job that can be picked up and doesn't need the continuity. But at other times there are jobs, such as those on the housing benefits side, where the person needs to absorb a lot of legislation and technical information. Then there's a sort of Catch-22 situation. Do we put a very able person into the post, who, when they are fully trained, will look to move on, or do we appoint someone who would be adequately equipped to do the job but will stay with us a little longer. There's no easy answer."

When 'overqualified' means 'over the hill'

Outplacement consultants claim that some recruiters who reject applicants on the grounds that they are 'overexperienced', have in fact repudiated them on other grounds. They may feel that the candidate is a threat to their position. "Maybe the person's future boss feels slightly intimidated by a person who can deliver twice the amount they were expecting," says Neil Sampson of Austin Knight. Maureen Ingle of Ashley Career Counselling concurs: "More often than not they are frightened of them. They think, 'I see them as a threat to my job, so there's no way I'm letting them through the door.'"

Consultants also believe that 'overqualification' is used to cover discrimination on the basis of age or sex. "Quite often it's the age thing – they don't want to appear to be ageist" says Maureen Ingle, "and sometimes it's sexism if it's a woman." Years of experience signals advanced years of age, so saying that a candidate is 'overexperienced', says Peter Lewis of Effective Resources, is "a disguised way of saying that they suspect a candidate is too old because they've got so much experience."

Sadly, people who are seen as a threat or as too old are rarely given the chance to explain why they are seeking a less demanding job. "Once the guy gets through the door," says Ashley Career Counselling's Maureen Ingle, "he may be able to turn the situation around by saying, 'Look, I'm not looking to be the MD of ICI – I just want something where I can contribute, where I get intellectual stimulation. I can top up my salary with my pension, and you'll get ten years of commitment out of me, compared to a youngster who'll use the job as a jumping board to somewhere else. In two years' time, he'll be gone and you'll be back to square one'. But older applicants often don't get the opportunity to say that."

Are advertisements to blame for over-qualified applicants?

Career consultants complain that many job advertisements, especially at the managerial, technical and professional end of the scale, are so imprecise

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and jargon-filled that it is impossible to gauge the status, salary and qualifications required. "They write an advertisement full of managerial-speak, get 200 replies, then complain that they have attracted 190 over-qualified applicants for what turns out to be a 15K job," complains one career consultant.

Career consultants are also aware of the hidden signals in advertisements. "In advertising, they use words that unconsciously say, 'We don't want any older ones,'" says Linda Aspey of Aspey Associates, "because words like 'graduate', 'creative', 'fast-moving' are equated with young, dynamic people."

Many advertisements, especially for executive positions, tend to gild the lily, to the frustration of those seeking posts. "Everybody's job isn't a duck, it's a swan," says Right Associates' Brian Ayling. "Applicants have the mistaken feeling that, 'I'm not overqualified – the job looks just about me' because the wording has been bumped up. These ads work like drag-nets: they are a catch-all, and that's what they do: catch all. The jargon they use means all things to all men. What does 'executive role' mean? What does a 'team motivation role' mean in real experience terms?"

"Very few adverts are specific," says Julie Hopkins of Methven Career Development. "Generally, when there isn't a clear title, or when the role isn't spelt out, there is a risk that candidates will not have the right qualifications, or be overqualified. If a salary is offered at 'circa something', you know that usually the applicant won't be paid that much. When they talk about 'an excellent salary for the right candidate', it means a bit of negotiating." "Employers have a habit of not putting a salary on the advertisement," says Maureen Ingle of Ashley Career Counselling. "Hitting the right button is very difficult when recruiters don't quantify the job, so they'll get applications that are way below and way above."

"I'm very suspicious of 'OTE' – on target earnings," says Linda Aspey. "The base earnings could be 15K but the OTE could be 80K – you never know. It's a case of using OTE numbers to beef up the ad and attract higher calibre candidates – it might attract those who are on 50-60K with a 20K bonus, rather than youngsters earning 15K."

Employers and agencies say that they produce such ads because they don't want to over restrict the job brief. "There is a move away from putting salaries on adverts," says Julie Murray, of Adecco Alfred Marks. "They don't put salaries in because they don't want to pigeonhole the job too much. People will look at the job and judge the level of seniority and the pressures of the job by the salary. If you advertise a job in the paper for 12K, people may not apply because they don't think it's enough, whereas the company might be willing to pay more if the candidate is exactly right for the job."

Yet some career consultants remain sceptical. "Some of the recruitment jargon – which reflects an estate agent hype mentality within some job recruitment firms – can oversell the whole thing. I am always wary of adverts that say that the organisation is brilliant and that the candidate must be 'excellent' with 'vision' and 'clarity'. This kind of advertising is immensely flattering for the client organisation – and, call me cynical, it is likely to guarantee the agency more work for the firm. But it does not tell the applicant what the company really wants." According to this career consultant, recruiters should "cut the rubbish." "They should say, 'we want this, this and this.'" Brian Ayling of Right Associates concurs. "Advertisers should say, 'you should have done this for so many years at such-and such level.' They should give some indication of the league they are in. Put in some numbers: for example, 'If you haven't handled £5 million, then don't talk to us, and if you have handled over £10 million, then you are over our level.'"

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Career counsellors don't see the point of confusing advertising. Candidates may be anxious to secure a new job, but, at the end of the day, they argue, a company will only get out what it is prepared to put in. "In the end you pay for what you get," says Julie Hopkins of Methven Career Development: "Some of the experience that is described as overqualification may be of value to a company." Not investing in that experience is, Hopkins believes, short-sighted. "They are looking to the pennies today, rather than to the pounds in the future."

Employers can reduce the likelihood of receiving a post bag full of unsuitable applications by ensuring their recruitment advertisements are clear, unambiguous and present a realistic picture of the organisation and what it has to offer. As the IPD states in its guide on recruitment," to be effective, recruitment advertisements or further information packs sent to initial respondents should contain a brief summary of the requirements of the job and the skills, experience and qualifications and/or competencies which are necessary and desirable, as well as details of the reward package on offer. Employers who are prepared to pay more to secure the right person may find it useful to specify a salary range.

People are less likely to send off a flood of inappropriate job applications if they have received advice on mounting an effective job search, together with a realistic assessment of the job opportunities available to them. Giving employees who are taking redundancy or early retirement counselling and careers advice can help counter the panic and desperation that many feel on being catapulted into unemployment after years of service. As well as advice on writing CVs and interview skills, employers may also help by allowing local job centres to conduct interviews on their premises or by circulating details of redundant employees to other employers. Another option is to provide advice and possibly direct assistance for redundant employees who decide to start their own businesses or operate as freelances."

Never assume, ask

Those who have been made redundant or have taken early retirement may not be able to find jobs to match their former status. Yet if they apply for more junior jobs their experience may work against them, although candidates often have strong motives – such as self-esteem and family security – for giving the job their all. While it is true that some people may be panicked into applying for unsuitable posts, others may have valid reasons for seeking a job at a more junior level. If employers don't give applicants the opportunity to explain why they want the job, they could be passing up on skills and expertise of value to their business.

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